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DISCUSSION: A BRIEF GUIDE TO METHODS



This Pamphlet is intended to assist Organizations and Individuals interested in establishing discussion groups, particularly in Rural Areas. It has been prepared by the Extension Service and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration of the United States Department of Agriculture, in response to an increasing number of requests for guidance of this character. It is an attempt to present in readable, nontechnical language some fundamentals of a method for increasing opportunities for obtaining facts and viewpoints on problems and questions of interest to rural people. A companion pamphlet, "How to Organize and Conduct County Forums", is also available without cost.

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

The Extension Service and the
Agricultural Adjustment Administration cooperating

This publication has been prepared to assist leaders of discussion groups, particularly in rural areas. It is intended for the use of chairmen, leaders, and speakers who want concise suggestions in using some of the informal methods which have come increasingly into use in the last fifteen years.

Attention is given to three main types of organization for discussion—the forum, the panel, and the discussion group—with emphasis on the latter. There is available a separate publication entitled, "How to Organize and Conduct County Forums." This will be of help to organizations and individuals who want additional information on forum methods.

The Department also has prepared or has in the process of preparation two series of subject-matter publications. The first, "Discussion Series A", are brief introductions to facts and opinions on 14 topics. The second, "Discussion Series B", consists of more extended statements on the same topics. No statement in either should be construed as an official expression of the Department of Agriculture. The topics for the two series are:

1. What is the Chief Cause of the Farm Depression?
2. Do Farmers want the Federal Government to Deal with Farm Problems?
3. Should American Agriculture Seek Recovery of World Markets or Arrange to Live at Home?
4. What Kind of Foreign Trade Policies do American Farmers Want? In Peace Time? In War Time?
5. What Kind of an Industrial Policy is Best for Agriculture?
6. The Farmer and the Consumer of Farm Products—What, If Any, Are Their Responsibilities to One Another?
7. Do Farmers Want High Tariffs on Farm Products? On Industrial Products?
8. Should Farm Benefit Payments Be Abolished?
9. Farm Prices—How Are They Made?
10. What Kind of Land Prices Would Be Best for Agriculture? For the Nation as a Whole?
11. Will Crop Adjustment Be Necessary or Desirable in Years to Come?
12. What Possibilities and Limitations do Farmers in this County Face in Seeking a Better Balance in Farm Production?
13. What Objectives Are Desirable for Farming as a Business? As a Way of Life?
14. What Should Farmers Seek to Accomplish Through Organization?

Discussion: A Brief Guide to Methods

A NEW INTEREST in national affairs is manifest. People are recognizing that the formation of national policies is a continuing process. Farmers, like others, are seeking means of getting pertinent information and then frankly discussing fundamental issues.

Methods of expressing this popular interest are as yet undeveloped in many areas. Many people in those areas feel a certain reticence in expressing themselves in meetings. They are unaccustomed to participation in public discussion, either in large or small groups.

In the course of the past decade, a considerable body of experience in discussion has been developed. It includes a variety of methods that have proved useful in facilitating discussion. In response to the interest in the establishment of centers of discussion, particularly in rural areas, the following brief summary of the three methods in most general use has been prepared. Appended to it is a bibliography which will enable persons interested to pursue the subject further.

Why Use Discussion Methods

Discussion methods offer several advantages for the consideration of fundamental issues and policies:

1. They give opportunity to the individual to think and to express his thoughts. Through the give and take of what is said in a discussion group, the individual acquires the ability:

(a) to look behind familiar phrases and see if they have meaning.

(b) to analyze policies as stated by the groups or interests putting them forward.

(c) to formulate and express his own point of view on issues and policies.

2. At the same time, the discussion method contributes to the enlightenment of the public and to the civic vitality of the community:

(a) by affording an opportunity to its citizens to become active participants in public affairs instead of being mere passive recipients of radio programs, speeches, lectures, newspaper articles, and the like.

(b) by opening national problems to serious public consideration. This grounding of local, regional, and national issues and policies in the minds of the people is indispensable to the functioning of a democracy.

Three Important Discussion Methods

The methods of public discussion described below have been developed out of the diverse experience of many groups, but underlying all of them are certain assumptions:

1. It is assumed that the persons using these methods themselves wish to participate in what is going on. Hence the lecture method of considering public issues is inappropriate to their purposes.

2. It is assumed that the persons using these methods are convinced of the desirability of hearing a wide variety of points of view on the subject. Hence the formal procedure of the debate, with its emphasis upon the matching of points pro with points con rather than upon the mutual canvassing of all points of view, is often unsuitable for their use.

3. It is assumed that the persons using these methods wish to acquaint themselves not only with information, but with judgments and opinions. Hence, the presentation of facts alone is considered insufficient.

The Discussion Group, the Panel, and the Forum

The principal methods which have been developed on the basis of these assumptions are the "discussion group", the "panel", the "forum", and a combination of these.

The Discussion Group

If local circumstances permit its use, and in rural areas the circumstances seem to be especially favorable, the method which is likely best to meet present requirements is the informal method of the "discussion group". This is because it permits the widest measure of popular participation. This method has been described as the modern equivalent of the cracker-barrel confab around the stove at the cross-roads store. There are countless informal and unplanned discussions by groups daily. The "discussion method" seeks to foster and extend these into increasingly profitable uses for individuals and groups, while retaining the quality of easy informality.

The primary consideration in the development of discussion is to obtain from members of groups the expression of a variety of genuine differences of viewpoint. Experience has shown that this can best be done if the group is not too large. A large group is almost cer-

tain to take on the character of an audience. Groups that are too small, unless they are accustomed to working together, are likely to provide insufficient differences of viewpoint to assure continued discussion. There is no hard and fast rule as to the number of persons making up a group in order to achieve maximum discussion. Fewer than ten is probably too small a group and more than thirty or thirty-five persons too large in order to obtain the best results in open discussion.

It is desirable, if not necessary, for a discussion group to be directed by a leader or chairman. In the selection of this leader it is well to keep in mind the following points:

1. The leader should be a person who is reasonably well informed on the general range of subjects which the group is likely to discuss.

2. The leader should be a person capable of acting as conciliator of the different points of view represented in the group. Under ordinary circumstances it is, therefore, preferable that he should not be prominently related to any organized group in the community that is forwarding a program in connection with the subjects to be discussed.

3. He should be the type of person who takes more pleasure in drawing out others than in being heard himself. He should not hesitate, however, to stimulate discussion when it tends to lag or to bring it back to focus on the discussion topic when it tends to drift far afield.

Important functions of the leader are:

1. To make certain that the issue or policy to be discussed is clear.

2. To make certain that the facts relevant to the subject under discussion are available. This may be done:

(a) by distributing material to the group members long enough before the meeting for them to read it.

(b) by asking a member of the group to summarize the material at an appropriate time during the meeting, or doing this himself.

(c) by inviting specialists to sit in with the group, or possibly to give a five- to fifteen-minute summary of the facts during the meeting. (Specialists should not be asked in, however, if their presence is likely to make members of the group reluctant to express opinions.)

3. To make sure that the different points of view in the group are heard. This may be done:

(a) by getting the group to set limits on the time to be taken for statements by its members, or on the number of times any one member may speak before all of the others who wish to be heard

have had a chance, and by genially but firmly enforcing those limits.

(b) by asking questions calculated to draw out unexpressed views. These questions may be either framed generally or pointed directly at certain members by reference to past expressions of opinion on their part.

4. To summarize, or to call on members of the group to summarize, the progress of the discussion at various stages. Formality should be avoided. Under normal circumstances the taking of votes in a discussion group is undesirable. The taking of votes has the same tendency as the use of the debating method in leading the group to take sides and then to defend the side taken rather than to canvass the whole subject. The use of summaries, which give the general development of the discussion along with the alternative points of view presented, keeps a group together where the voting process divides.

5. To maintain the attitude that thorough canvass of the problem under discussion is more important than hasty arrival at opinions and solutions.

The Panel

In some cases and in some places the formation of the small groups essential to the use of the discussion method may seem impracticable. Use of the panel is frequently a successful way to develop public discussion where the group is large. A single rural meeting may be attended by 100 or more farmers. This method does not provide, however, the same measure of popular participation as does the more informal discussion group.

A panel is a small discussion group occupying the platform and carrying on its discussion before an audience. A panel discussion can be conducted in a variety of ways, always, however, incorporating certain essential features. There should be a chairman and a group of four to eight members of the panel. In the selection of the panel members the object should be to provide for the presentation of the chief points of view on a given subject by people of relatively equal ability. Unless care is taken in choosing panel members, the audience is likely to carry away a one-sided impression of the subject.

Panel discussions can be carried on either independently or in connection with the remarks of a speaker who first addresses the audience. Under normal circumstances the panel first discusses the topic in question sufficiently to bring out the chief points of view; then the chairman invites members of the audience to participate in the discussion, either addressing questions to members of the panel or to the speaker, or presenting their own points of view.

The Forum

The forum is still another useful medium of public discussion. Where this method is used one or more speakers are asked to present their views. After they have finished the chairman or leader then opens the meeting to discussion by the audience, whose members may either contribute their own views or address inquiries to the speakers. The function of the leader here, as in the case of discussion groups, is to stimulate wide participation in the discussion and, without holding it within rigid confines, to keep it definitely focused.

Combinations of the Three Methods

Forum and panel discussions, when taken by themselves, are less satisfactory than the discussion group in providing a means of popular participation. But they offer possibilities which should not be ignored for use in combination with the discussion group method.

A well-directed forum or panel discussion, held at the time when discussion groups are forming, may bring in more and a wider variety of members than might otherwise be reached.

After the several discussion groups of an area have been for some time in operation, area or county forums or panel discussions, with participants selected from the local discussion groups, may be held. This is particularly desirable where local or regional issues have formed the subject of group discussion, and where there is need or desire for a group meeting likely to attract more people than can conveniently use the discussion method.

Meeting Plans

Chairmen who are preparing for discussions using any of the methods described will find it useful to make sure in advance—

1. That the time of the meetings does not conflict with other community meetings.
2. That the place of the meeting is such that all members of the community will feel free to come, and will find the surroundings congenial.
3. That an atmosphere of informality prevails. Seating arrangements should be comfortable and chairs placed so that those participating in a discussion can see each other.

Chairmen will find it highly desirable at the first meeting of the group to give a brief explanation of what the discussion method is and to find out what issues the group wants to discuss. Interest is certain to be greater if the group makes its own program, choosing the local and national issues it is most interested in discussing.

Selection of Subjects for Discussion

Here, again, there is no one method that can be laid down in advance. Some leaders prefer the ultra-democratic procedure of calling a group together without any well-defined subject in view and then drawing up the topics out of the interests and concerns that develop among the members of the group. This method requires great skill, however. Leaders with limited experience may not wish to use it.

Other leaders may want to announce a subject as a starter and let the group determine what the future aspects of the topic are or what new topics will be taken up. Still others may want to go to the group with a list of topics, to learn which of them appeal to the members and to let them select among the suggested themes.

The Department of Agriculture has available two series of publications on 14 topics that may be of interest to farm groups. Discussion Series A consists of brief introductions to widely held views on these topics; it is intended for reading by members of discussion groups in advance of group meetings. Discussion Series B treats the same topics at greater length; it is intended for the use of forums, chairmen, speakers, and members of groups who wish to do further reading.

What are good subjects for discussion? This also is an important question. In general, subjects must be those in which there is a considerable degree of interest in the community. Again, there may be subjects on which members of the group have special experience or on which they have been doing some reading. Subjects may, or may not, be put into question form. A question which permits of a definite "Yes" or "No" answer is ordinarily *not* a good one for group discussion.

Conducting the Discussion

There is no one method of conducting a group discussion. Topics vary so widely, the information available in the minds of members of the group is so diverse, and the experience of different groups in group discussion is so different that what works best in one situation may not be the best procedure in another. The following suggestions, however, are offered as of general aid:

In practically all group discussion meetings the topic for discussion will have been chosen and be known in advance by the members of the group and the leader, at least, will have given some thought to the scope and content of the topic.

The first necessary step to a successful discussion is to evolve the issues at stake in the topic. If possible, issues should be stated by

members of the group. If this cannot be accomplished fairly easily, it may be necessary for the leader to state one or two issues in order to start discussion. It should be kept in mind, however, that a discussion of what the issues are, may be just as fruitful as is controversy on the issues once they are agreed upon.

After the issues have been evolved by the most natural method possible and have become clear to the group, either through a summary by the leader or through having been placed on a blackboard before the group, the next step in procedure is to obtain wide and varied discussion. In this process the leader should take care to see that all points of view are presented and that the group is helped to make a thorough inquiry into and canvass of the body of fact and opinion available on the topic.

There is no absolute and unvarying rule which can be followed in introducing information into a group discussion. In some instances it may be desirable to start the discussion with a brief résumé of pertinent data. In other instances, it may be best to present facts or data at that point in the progress of discussion where they apply, and in some instances the presentation of data may be made in a short summary at the conclusion of discussion.

In no case should the leader (or visiting specialist) allow controversy to continue on a point which can be briefly settled by stating an authoritative fact, the presentation of which would later embarrass one of the disputants. Neither should data, the interpretation of which is controversial, be presented in such a manner or at such a time as to stop fruitful discussion. Data presented in a group discussion must always be briefly stated and be presented in the most lucid manner possible. Simple charts or graphs are always better vehicles of presentation than detailed statistics.

The final step in group discussion, though one which may not always be taken, is a summary by the leader or some member of the group. When a summary is presented, the conclusions stated should be only those which have been reached by the group. It should be kept in mind constantly that the purpose of discussion is more to stimulate thinking than to find immediate solution of problems, and that the creative experience of participation in discussion is often more valuable than arrival at conclusions.

Before adjournment it is highly desirable that the topic and time of meeting for the next discussion be determined and announced. If literature on the next topic or the one just discussed is at hand, it should be distributed at this time and all assistance possible given to persons who want bibliographies on group discussion topics.

Materials—Preparation of Data

The use of data depends upon the plan adopted by a discussion group. Discussion groups, whose topics are determined and announced in advance, can arouse in their members a desire to search out facts and opinions and to study them in preparation for the discussion. In some cases the search for materials, as discussed elsewhere, can be left to certain members of the group. In any event, the search for data and the preparation of materials involves labor and planning. Frequently, it is wise to govern the selection of topics for discussion by the availability of materials.

Books and pamphlets in homes, school, and public libraries obviously provide one of the primary sources of material. Newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals can be employed. Many farm papers and farm organizations can be of assistance. The United States Department of Agriculture, state colleges of agriculture, County Extension Agents, and other agricultural agencies, both public and private, can supply useful information.

The importance of obtaining all possible light on the topic cannot be overemphasized. At the same time, groups should not lose sight of their main purpose—to arouse discussion—and interest in this central purpose is likely to be lost if most of the period available for discussion is devoted to statements of fact, or the reading of opinions.

The distinction between discussion groups and study groups should not be ignored. It is the experience of discussion groups that participants do not systematically prepare for discussion in advance of meetings.

A stimulating discussion is almost certain to lead those who have participated to pursue their interest afterwards; the period of the discussion itself is best used to stimulate thought on, rather than assimilation of, material pertinent to the issue. Suggestions as to sources of reading and other materials for subsequent perusal by participants can be made a valuable byproduct of the meetings.

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